

You first: Minnesota nice

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [December 14, 2004](#) issue

That the phrase “Minnesota nice” is considered an insult by many says a lot about contemporary culture. I’m sure Minnesotans are as capable of acting on their original sin as are citizens of other states. But just often enough numbers of them behave in ways that startle non-nice Americans.

The most recent example is that generous and thoughtful Minnesota seniors who are eligible for flu shots are not lining up for them. We read (*New York Times*, November 12) of typical Ann Thiel, an 88-year-old who got her flu shots in the past but has passed them up now. “I think an awful lot of money is spent on people my age at the expense of young people. I think I’ve had my share of good luck,” she says. Such statements inspired Kristen Ehresmann, a state health official, to say, “They call it Minnesota nice. People feel that they should defer for someone who needs it more.” May Ann Blade of the Minnesota Visiting Nurse Agency says, “They are so wonderful and worried about each other. That’s the real strength of Minnesota, I think.”

How un-American. More typical of our me-first or me-only mentality is an editorial in *USA Today* (November 9), wherein novelist and regular contributor Robert Lipsyte takes on the critics of selfish net stars in the National Basketball Association. Lipsyte defends the stars against “the murmurings about a subversive cult of selfishness.” He’s all for the narcissism of show-boaters and ball-hogs and antiauthoritarian players who worked their own way up out of difficult circumstances. “Sooner or later, the rest of the world will catch up to us in selfishness and narcissism. The eventual triumph of American values means we’ll start winning international championships again,” he writes—with, one hopes, a tinge of irony.

In our culture even efforts that suggest common endeavor get trashed. A school board in Virginia Beach would not allow competitors to wear the omnipresent LIVESTRONG bracelets that admirers of cyclist Lance Armstrong and fighters against cancer wear. In a recent issue of *Sports Illustrated*, Rick Reilly says, “A girl who couldn’t pick Christ out of a lineup can wear a trendy fake-ruby-encrusted crucifix, but a girl who wants to honor her hospitalized father can’t wear a LIVESTRONG bracelet.” I share Reilly’s sense of outrage until he quotes someone who justifies the

bracelet on American-religious lines. Noting that athletes are only allowed to wear medals signaling religious faith, he cites a school board member who says, “The band *is* a display of faith . . . faith in oneself.”

Faith in oneself usually issues in the selfishness and narcissism that Lipsyte defends and that goes against the spirit of “Minnesota nice”—and that often dominates the ethos of Christmas shopping. Since America today advertises itself to the point of narcissism as the faith-based center of the universe, one hopes that religious models other than “faith in oneself” live among us.

The Gospels teach us to focus on the welfare of others and to be generous.

In II Corinthians 8:7-9 Paul writes, “I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.” He challenges the Corinthians to do likewise.

Remember the bracelet that preceded LIVESTRONG, the one that read WWJD? What would Jesus do, in this gift-giving season? Maybe he would, like Minnesota’s generous seniors, defy the “me first” crowd and show true generosity to others.